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SUBJECT: SEDUCED BY THE UNITED STATES

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Describing a sea change in their opinions about the United States, on December 19 eight Moroccan women political leaders talked about how they were "seduced" by the U.S. political system and our top leadership during their election visit to the U.S. Several women who held negative opinions of the U.S. prior to the trip expressed a hope that their children would be able to study there one day. They looked forward to the opportunity to mobilize women and younger voters in the upcoming elections, in which 12 percent of the seats will be reserved for women, and called for technical campaign assistance for the many female candidates who will be running for office for the first time. The Embassy will continue to engage these leaders with a view to supporting increased women's involvement in Moroccan politics. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Eight women political leaders from diverse parties gathered at Villa America, the Ambassador's residence, on December 19 to report on their visit to the U.S. under the Middle East Partnership Initiative-(MEPI-)sponsored Election Exchange. The Election Exchange program, funded by MEPI and

implemented in conjunction with American University, brought 44 women from the Maghreb and broader Middle East to the U.S. to observe the electoral process. Each participant attended a workshop on the American political process in Washington, D.C., as well as local campaign events in two states, and then observed the presidential election. Participants met with local and national leaders, including both President Bush and Secretary Rice, and representatives of non-governmental organizations.

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We Were Seduced  
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¶3. (SBU) &"We were all seduced," said Hakima El Haite, a campaign strategist and member of the Popular Movement (MP) party, referring to the warm reception they received from President Bush. "Even those women whose families and countries have been destroyed by war were seduced. We have begun to love the United States," she elaborated. Most of the other women agreed. In their first reunion since their return from the U.S., the women, who were all either elected officials or planned to run in the upcoming national elections, underlined the ways in which the program radically changed their opinion of the U.S., and asked for assistance in promoting women's political participation in Morocco.

¶4. (SBU) Illustrating the effectiveness of this exchange program, many of the women admitted that they had &"atrocious prejudices" about the U.S. Government and the American people prior to the trip. Hakima El Haite noted her deep skepticism that an African-American could ever become President. When President-elect Obama won, she &"realized that democracy in America is real and that Blacks, Muslims

(and) women, can all make a difference.<sup>8</sup> Underlining just how much the exchange altered their views, several women who held negative opinions of the U.S. prior to the trip expressed a hope that their children would be able to study there. &If they go, they will learn that competence and merit, rather than gender or religion, matter,<sup>8</sup> they said.

¶5. (SBU) Echoing her counterparts, Ghizlane Maamouri a member of the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS), recounted her amazement that she &never felt like a foreigner<sup>8</sup> while in the U.S., an experience not replicated in any of her travels in Europe or the Middle East. Some of the other women expressed surprise at how comfortable they felt wearing a veil in the United States, noting that &in Europe that is not the case.<sup>8</sup> The trip eliminated the women's preconceptions that the United States is a racist place, they said, and allowed &us to change our prejudiced ideas.<sup>8</sup>

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Looking Forward to Local Elections  
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¶6. (SBU) Enthusiastically praising the electoral exchange, the women said they were inspired by the efforts of American candidates to mobilize women and younger voters, and expressed a desire to replicate that mobilization in Morocco. Although Morocco has recently reserved 12 percent of seats for women in the upcoming municipal elections, the political parties are still resistant to allowing women to participate, or giving them meaningful leadership opportunities, they said. They suggested that a hotline, which could provide advice on fund raising, campaign management or voter mobilization, would help female candidates overcome the technical hurdles of running for office and compensate for lack of support from the parties. Zahra Chagaf, an MP and a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, emphasized the need for women candidates to better use the media, engage women and younger voters, and put an end to Morocco's &political abstinence.<sup>8</sup>

¶7. (SBU) Comment: After the session, the women asked for a side meeting with Pol FSN to underscore their interest in continuing practical cooperation. The positive impressions gained by these women are an additional achievement beyond the political exposure and training they received from this MEPI project. The Embassy looks forward to continuing our relationship with these women leaders through the 2009 elections and beyond. End Comment.

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